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ABSTRACT

Developing social indicators of basic human needs involves (1) recognizing the problems in selection, (2) identifying the criteria for making selections, (3) choosing which basic needs to cover, and (4) selecting the indicators. The social indicators are to help formulate U.S. foreign policy and will be used by the State Department's Bureau of Human Rights in its annual country reports to Congress. Problems in selecting indicators of adequate living standards include data accuracy, data comparability across diverse cultures, appropriateness of the measures to U.S. policy, and proper interpretation of the indicators when making policy. In light of these problems, ten criteria were developed for the selection and presentation of the indicators. Education, health, nutrition, and income emerged as the basic needs to cover. Within these limits, the Bureau selected 12 social indicators, including infant mortality rate, population growth rate, primary school enrollment rate, household income shares, and calory supply per capita. Because of the change from the Carter to the Reagan administration, the indicators may not be used, but the process of choosing the indicators has helped clarify the issues and problems surrounding social indicators. (RW)

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Social Indicators of Basic Needs: Quantitative Data for Human Rights Policy

by

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Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting, Los Angeles, California, April 1981

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The Problem

Most of us are aware that, under the Carter Administration the U.S. pursued a policy of limiting aid or otherwise placing sanctions on countries which violate basic human rights by torturing prisoners or imprisoning people for their political beliefs. Fewer people know that among the internationally recognized human rights are a series which deal with basic human needs--education, health, employment, shelter -- in general, with the right to an adequate standard of living. U.S. human rights policy has not generally taken these into account, although they are clearly included in the international agreements, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which form the basis of U.S. policy.

While there are several explanations for this lapse, the one which is most pertinent in this context is the argument that the meeting of basic human needs is viewed by some as merely a social objective and not a right equivalent to protection of the integrity of the person or freedom of speech. Behind this argument is the idea that need is culturally defined and that no common international standard could ever be applied to determine whether needs are being met. Rights, on the other hand, are often understood to be absolute and definable. Many presume it is easy to determine whether rights are being adhered to. Rights are in any case of unequivocal moral importance, and many are skeptical about the moral importance of basic needs.

Basic needs are, indeed, mainly defined in the context of specific cultures, times, and available resources. Even if one just considers the U.S., the measure and concepts of income adequacy differ by region and they have evolved tremendously with changing life styles and

prevalent incomes. Rights also are defined and constrained, however, by social and political contexts and the resources available to protect them. Rights are themselves merely social objectives that are given special priority at a time and place. There are never sufficient political or economic resources to assure that all rights are met -- that all minorities have equal opportunities, that government never abridges the freedom of expression or that every suspect is protected. Every right of one person in practice may conflict with another right. But this does not mean we dispense with the label "rights".

The international community for more than a quarter century has agreed, at least in principle, that the achievement of basic needs should be viewed as a right for the world's population. This agreement does not mean basic needs are expected to be fully achieved in the near future--only that they have special priority. As for the moral importance of basic needs, malnutrition and ill health cause more suffering than most political repression. These and the lack of educational opportunities can themselves be used as forms of oppression.

If international policies, however, are to encourage, assist, or pressure nations to achieve basic human needs, some definition and measurement of existing levels of need is essential. The establishment of some standards, or at least benchmarks, to guide policy is also a need. In short, social indicators are required if human rights policy on basic needs is to be implemented.

Improving the Country Reports on Human Rights

Therefore the Bureau of Human Rights in the U.S. Department of State retained me in mid 1980 to help further the effort of the the Carter Administration to strengthen human rights policy, by introducing social indicators into the Annual Country Reports, which provide the basis for U.S. human rights policies. These reports deal with such matters as cases of torture, mysterious disappearances, and with policies and actions to protect or limit civil and personal liberties in 154 countries. These topics were relatively well developed in the report to and supported by considerable data. The sections of the Reports ostensibly describing each country's policies to meet its people's vital needs however, were not even potentially useful for U.S. policy. They were inconsistent in their coverage and contained little data or other relatively objective information on conditions or on the countries' policies.

This situation was due on the one hand, to a lack of sophistication in the Foreign Service on social policy concerns and, on the other, to "clientism," the inevitable tendency of embassies to try to shed the best possible light on their host country's policies. These sections of the reports were laden with subjective language, vague impressions and individual opinions. What was covered for one country was not for another. My responsibility was to develop a framework and a set of social indicators for those vital needs sections, so that they could provide more comparable and objective pictures of countries' committments to meeting human needs. The effort permitted me to apply much of what I had learned in earlier research on the types of indicators that

are actually used in policy and on the issues of international comparability (de Neufville, 1975, 1978-9). It led me to some conclusions, not only about particular indicators appropriate for current international policy, but also to some observations about those who produce and potentially use such policy indicators.

U .S. Human Rights Policy

Human rights policy is the result of nine years of incremental growth, primarily as Congress attached riders to many types of legislation, asserting that aid or loans should not be given to countries in which there is a "consistent pattern of gross violations of human rights". In recent years the policy has been modified for such aid programs as Food for Peace (PL-480) so that aid can be given to countries where it will "directly benefit the needy". Policies most affected have involved bilateral and multilateral loans and Congressional decisions on foreign aid (U.S. Congress, 1979). In the latter part of the Carter Administration, policies of sanctions against countries violating human rights pervaded much foreign policy.

The required Annual Country Reports to Congress on human rights represent the official view of human rights conditions. They provide descriptive information and do not prescribe policy, nor give information which can be mechanically translated into policy prescriptions. No one has decided how many mysterious disappearances over how long make for a "consistent pattern of gross violations." Indeed there is neither need nor interest in developing such specific standards. Those involved in foreign policy protect their right and need to make decisions which

take into account a tremendous range of information about a country in a way which demands a healthy component of judgement by those who are experienced and knowledgeable. No simple standards defining intolerable human rights violations have emerged -- nor have simple criteria developed to guide policy. Yet data in the reports do have a powerful and imageable impact on policy, affecting it in a variety of ways.

While the resistance to application of simple standards is normal in foreign policy, it was particularly inevitable in this case because human rights policy itself was taking specific shape only while it was being implemented. The policy mandate was vague and its implications emerged as it was applied to particular cases, primarily by a task force, headed by Deputy Secretary of State, Warren Christopher, which considered each case individually. Out of these decisions some consistent policy principles gradually emerged, but these were rather complex. For example, governments may be deemed to have a low committment to human rights if they are known to have had the political capacity in the past to protect rights, but have later abridged these rights with little justification. The U.S. has acted punitively when the pattern was pronounced and when relations with a country gave some leverage. The policy criteria can be sensibly applied only when intimately connected to a complex set of other variables, and when seen in a total context of a country's political traditions and development level, and in relation to whatever foreign policy strategies the U.S. is pursuing for other purposes, such as economics and defense. In other words standards or criteria are applied, but only in the context of qualitative, holistic, judgements and political priorities.

Principles for the Selection of Social Indicators

The complex and evolving process of analysis and decision making in human rights policy and the tradition of proceeding without reliance on quantitative measures are both important factors in considering the selection of indicators. Other constraints were set by the variable quality and low comparability of data available across nations. Developing nations, where minimum basic needs are least adequately met, have particular problems in gathering accurate data. Even the basic census is often partially guesswork, particularly for rural populations, which are hard and expensive to count. Resources and skills for sophisticated surveys are seldom available. Moreover, many government activities, like the provision of hospitals or registration of doctors, are not sufficiently regularized to provide the consistent sources of information that they can in more developed countries. In different nations, moreover, the simplest measure may take on entirely different implications. School may be a place where a rigorous course of academic education goes on, a place where the barely literate try to teach the illiterate, or where all that is learned is farming techniques. A person labelled doctor in one society may be merely a health practitioner in another. And when the notion of minimum adequacy is introduced, the difficulties are compounded. What is adequate housing in one society is hopelessly inadequate in another, both because of objective differences such as climate, and because of more elusive variability in resources, values, and expectations.

Faced with these rather discouraging realities, we had to select some indicators for the reports to pin them to some greater degree of

objectivity and comparability than before. Unless an indicator is very poor indeed, it is likely to be less misleading and more informative than a statement that a problem is serious or minor. Such assessments are in the eye of the reporter. What is serious to him or her may not be to someone else. Indicators, appropriately selected, obviate the need for such commentary. The problem would be to identify indicators appropriate to the policy issues which would at least be more accurate than purely qualitative assessments and to outline a format and context for interpretation and presentation appropriate to the understanding of those who would be preparing and using the reports. The major fear was that the indicators, along with all their limitations, would become enshrined as the criteria for policy, and they would replace rather than supplement the complex analyses of experts. Thresholds and standards and rank orderings of nations might be prematurely established on the basis of indicators which were at best crude approximations to the issues.

However, an understanding of the policy process allayed this fear and provided one set of principles for the selection of indicators. They would be used, not as mechanical criteria, but as one source of information in a complex decision process -- reference points, but not absolute standards. They would have to be approximately right and have clear meanings so they could be integrated into the qualititative analysis and be understood by the various actors. Fortunately they would not, however, have to be perfectly designed and highly precise.

In future a demand could develop for indicators that were more than merely approximations. When a policy has been discussed and applied

over a period of years, it may be both possible and essential to define clear and precise indicators and standards to use as criteria. The CPI, for example has provided a standard for evaluating wage and price increases by regulatory agencies. However, it is far more typical that policies are too vague for strict standards to be applied in their application. Moreover, implementers find their jobs more difficult if they are bound by rigid requirements. When policies are left unclear until implementation, it is generally because there is much disagreement about them in practice. Any effort to develop precise measures at the outset for use in such policies will create the necessity to define the policy precisely and may destroy it altogether before it has had a chance to develop.

Once a policy has taken definite shape, those who must carry it out often welcome the introduction of standards, where possible, as a way of simplifying their task and avoiding intense political conflict over every case. A threshold unemployment level, for example has been used to trigger regional programs of unemployment benefits in the U.S., and indicators are often used to identify which areas will be eligible for funding of various types. But on the whole, policy makers are resistant to the reduction of their decision-making autonomy and the exercise of their judgment through the mechanical application of quantitative measures to policy.

If decision-makers were not going to make mechanical use of the indicators to compare countries and perhaps draw unwarranted conclusions from approximate, but in many ways inadequate, indicators, then the problem of selecting indicators was considerably easier. Foreign policy

analysts would not look at the data out of context, nor would they be willing to report the indicators without interpretion. There still could be some danger of misuse of the indicators by those less knowledgeable than the experts, but at least the problem was minimized.

A second perspective on the choice of indicators emerged from discussion with State Department staff involved in writing the Reports from information supplied by embassies. With a few exceptions, mostly in AID, even the most experienced of foreign policy analysts interviewed were not sophisticated data users. If they are comfortable with quantitative data it was primarily economic data. Among those interviewed two views were expressed. At one extreme one or two Foreign Service Officers proposed that the reports be made up entirely of indicators so they would be totally "objective". At the other end of the spectrum, some analysts felt that the introduction of "statistical detail" was a waste of time, detracting from the important bottom line -- their judgements about the quality of the country's effort. The first response reflected naivete about the highly variable quality of data in many countries and the limited subjects on which one can find even reasonably acceptable figures. The picture presented would have little meaning without interpretation for each country. On the other hand, those resistant to indicators in their own reports reluctantly agreed they would like them in the reports others produced and those which came from embassies because they were frustrated by assessments they knew to be biased.

So the indicators would be reluctantly and skeptically used by some and fervently believed and relied on by others. They would have to be

extremely easy to gather because there would be considerable resistance to collecting them from those long accustomed to operating without quantitative information. They would also have to be as accurate and as transparent in meaning as possible so that the many who would accept them uncritically could not be led too far astray. Some other source of legitimacy for the data than the assessment of the users themselves would have to be depended on, since few of the indicator users would have the knowledge to be discriminating or to take into account the limitations on the data's accuracy and reliability.

A third set of principles grew out of the demand for a common set of indicators for all countries. The indicators would have to represent a set of conceptions and, perhaps, standards that are shared internationally. They would have to represent the lowest common denominator and the barest minimum of acceptability. Controversial concepts and measures could destroy the usefulness of all the indicators and make it unlikely that the basic needs component of policy would be implemented at all. Countries would perhaps be classified into various categories for which different sets of indicators could be recommended, according to what could reasonably be expected from them. Multiple standards or relative standards might be applied, if a reasonable basis for them could be found. Assuming, however, that policy would, in any case, apply certain concepts of need in some crude, subjective way, any improvement of need measurement would enhance the power and justice of the policy.

A fourth principle in selecting the indicators was that they should be conceptually connected to the statements about human needs in the

official policy documents and in the literature on strategies for human resource development. Where the objective is to inform policy, the indicators based on the conceptions from political or social theory that many propose are seldom useful. Alienation and social mobility, for example are undoubtedly, at some deep level, related to human rights as causes or effects of problems, but those elusive concepts are not the goals of any policy nor can policy immediately affect them. Policy indicators must be as directly and operationally linked to actual and potential policy actions as possible if they are to influence decisions (Scott and Shore, 1979).

Two main guides were used in selection of the topics for the indicators: the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which is the spelling out of the policy implications of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; and the literature on the problems and policies in meeting basic needs, particularly in developing countries. A growing literature now focuses on basic needs as a component of development strategy, so there is a rich set of ideas to draw upon. (See for example, McHale and McHale, 1978, World Bank; 1975; International Labour Office, 1976; and Streeaten, 1977)

Matching Indicators to the Policy Process

The following conditions existed in the human rights policy-making process:

(1) The policy itself was controversial;

(2) It could not be implemented without some widely acceptable

indicators ;

(3) The policy had to be applied to many countries, each with its own unique conditions;

(4) Many countries could gain or lose considerably if the policy were applied;

(5) The policy mandate was broad and vague, and it was being defined while being applied;

(6) Many of the social indicators available for certain countries were highly unreliable;

(7) Documents existed outlining officially and commonly accepted standards and concepts of human needs for human rights policy;

(8) Those who would assemble the indicators, prepare the analyses in the Country Reports, and be the principal users of the data were not sophisticated about either social policies or the uses and limitations of social indicators and, for the most part, were not enthusiastic about using quantitative measures at all;

(9) While there was considerable disagreement about desirable policies for meeting basic needs, there was a substantial area of agreement in the literature and among international organizations on types of policies that best meet the most pressing of human needs in developing countries.

From these conditions the following criteria for social indicator selection and presentation were developed:

(1) Indicators should be internationally accepted and recognized measures, backed by a reputable institution which would not be subject to pressure from interested countries wanting to manipulate the data.

(2) The indicators should be limited in number and readily intelligible in meaning and policy implications to their likely users.

(3) They should be readily available for all or most countries.

(4) They should be directly and substantively linked to the least controversial basic needs goals and to the national policies thought most likely to achieve them.

(5) They should reflect minimum international standards, where such standards appear to exist and to be shared. Where no threshold values of minimum adequacy are identifiable, indicators should at least be comparable across countries sufficiently to provide a general sense of whether or not a condition is relatively good, given a country's level of development and resource availability.

(6) Social indicators should be presented against an interpretive analysis of a country's conditions, development strategy, history, and special problems. They should not be presented out of context.

(7) They should be viewed as approximations which give some concrete evidence of the scale of problems and directions of change. They should make presentations more objective than they would otherwise be, but not be reified and applied as mechanical standards.

(8) Composite overall indexes like the PQLI[1] should be avoided because they force policy analysts to deal with a rank ordering and simplistic comparison of countries. Decision makers will, in any case, resist using indices which interfere with their ability to make complex judgements. The rank ordering that is inevitable into single measures may do injustice to any given country. Moreover such indices, in collapsing issues into single unscrutable numbers give no good sense of what the particular policy needs are. Worst of all, such composite measures are inevitably meaningless. No one has found a conceptually sensible way to combine social needs along a scale with a single dimension. How many units of literacy are worth how many units of health? The question is silly and the task not worth attempting.

(9) Social indicators are measures of social conditions in a country from time to time, and they cannot be presumed to reflect directly the output of policies. Even when considerable effort is applied to evaluate impacts of policies under carefully controlled experimental conditions, it is difficult to determine with confidence what these impacts were . Care should be taken in the presentation of the indicators not to allow unwarranted conclusions to be drawn by unsophisticated users about the reasons for changes in the measures. Presentation of indicators therefore should be separated from presentation of policies. Social indicators can show that certain types of problems exist and can demonstrate how serious they probably are, but only information on the

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[1] Physical Quality of Life Index (PQLI), a combination of literacy rate, life expectancy and infant mortality often used to rank order countries on their quality of life (Morris, 1979).

actual implementation of policies can provide the assessment of a country's committment to meeting human needs.

(10) Both input and output or performance indicators should be used if available, as both are pertinent to assessing policy and policy needs. Thus the numbers of schools may be as relevant as indicators of literacy.

For other countries the longer list of indicators will be included, providing a many-faceted quantitative picture of conditions. Indicators have been selected both because they seem to be the most accurate available, according to a variety of assessments and because they mesh with certain basic needs objectives and policies. All indicators will be given in terms of most recent figures, and figures for the near-term past (approximately five years, where available) to provide a sense of the direction and speed of change.

The Policy Concerns

Four basic needs were selected for attention from among a considerably longer list delineated by the International Covenant--education, health, nutrition, and income. In addition, discrimination against women in these areas was also singled out. Other important basic needs in the Covenant were not recommended for coverage for a variety of reasons. For example, indicators of unemployment for a majority of countries are so inadequate as to be more misleading than informative. Unemployment, as normally measured, refers only to people looking for work in the modern sector. The vast majority of employment problems in developing countries involve underemployment in the informal sector, but

no one has found a meaningful way to measure this, nor are even plausible data available on nationwide bases. Moreover, no consensus exists in the literature on appropriate policies for employment in such countries. Thus a government's committment to assuring employment is difficult to assess or report on, particularly in the brief context of a few lines in the Country Reports.

No indicators were selected for a number of other declared rights like a fair wage, or various types of social insurance. These clearly are still very distant goals for many countries, and the evidence suggests they are achieved routinely when development reaches a certain point. Shelter was not included because data on housing adequacy in developing countries is particularly poor, and because the poorest groups spend 80% of their incomes on food and only a tiny percentage on shelter. It seemed that, for the time being, education, health, nutrition, and income were highest priorities. In the interest of making the report effective, the numbers of items covered had to be limited to those most would agree were reasonable goals for all nations.

Several criteria were applied in determining which needs would be suggested for coverage. Needs would be those which would have to be met before many others, and for which indicators could be found at least partially reflecting the extent of the problem. For each of the topics chosen, there would have to be a kind of standard, — not in each case defining the exact level that should be achieved, but at least a common international concept of the nature of the objective. Moreover, all the needs selected are interconnected. The failure to meet one can prevent the attainment of others. The unhealthy and poorly nourished cannot

learn. Families whose incomes are too low cannot afford to send their children to school. Finally, the emphasis was on the welfare of the poorest groups and on achievement of minimum standards for such groups. In most cases this means focusing on data and policies for rural areas. Rural poverty represents the vast majority of severe want in the world and, in practice, many government services do not now reach effectively into rural areas.

For education one clear minimum standard exists - that all have a right to free primary education. Less explicitly this is a right to achieve a basic functional literacy. Other rights are enumerated too in the Covenant--access to secondary and higher education based on merit for example, but the literature reveals many disputes over education strategy. How much emphasis should elementary education be given versus secondary and higher? Should education be vocational mainly or academic? If the latter will it lead to unduly raised expectations and unemployment? And should formal education be instituted if it disrupts traditional life styles in rural areas? In choosing to emphasize the goal of functional literacy, we attempted to avoid most of these controversies, but inevitably took the stand that the right to education had to preempt the right to maintain traditional life styles which depend on maintaining generations in ignorance. The value that all should have access to learning is widely accepted internationally, even where there are costs.

Poor nutrition is a major reason for the prevalence and severity of many diseases, and it interferes with the ability to attend school and to work. It can create a permanent handicap for those malnourished in

their early years. A rudimentary standard of needed daily caloric intake has been developed by FAO for individual countries. The indicator is a rough measure as it does not deal with nutritional quality nor the distribution of actual intake, but it does reflect quantity and it is widely used for international comparison. For the present purpose it provides a starting point and gives a sense of the scale of the problem, and it is available for virtually all countries. The causes of malnutrition are low income and ignorance, if one looks at individual families. In the societal context, the causes have to do with the availability and relative prices of food as well as with the distribution of jobs and income. While the desirability of nutrition policies is interlinked with agricultural polices and problems, encouragment of farmers to grow foods typically consumed by the poor, dietary supplements and nutrition education are generally good approaches to meeting this basic need.

Basic health needs include freedom from disease and access to health care. Operationally this means, in developing countries, sanitation, clean water supplies, preventive efforts such as vaccination and health education, and access to health practitioners, clinics, and hospitals as necessary. In general these needs are far less adequately met in the countryside than the cities. No minimum standards of health or sanitation exist. The indicators on actual conditions in a range of countries, available over a period of years, however, do provide a basis for evaluating how severe the problem is in a given country and whether or not its severity is the inevitable concomitant of its development level and climatic or other problems. Many countries have succeeded in improving health conditions considerably beyond the average for their

level of development. International organizations are now focusing on "primary" health care programs, which provide at least low technology health services in the rural areas and emphasize prevention and education as the cheapest and most effective way to bring up minimum levels of health.

Linked to all those needs is the most basic one -- income and access to an adequate standard of living. While no internationally recognized poverty line exists, at least a vague and somewhat comparable concept of income adequacy is applied in practice. It does vary for conditions in each country, relative prices and the availability of government services. In general an adequate standard of living provides at least nutrition that can maintain health, support minimal shelter, provide health care, and enough income to assure children can go to school rather than work. While the necessary income level to achieve these goals varies for countries, these common defining criteria are backed by considerable consensus.

While data on actual income and wealth levels of individuals is virtually unattainable, for at least middle-range developing countries income distribution measures are available. Relative incomes and the proportion of the population with much lower incomes than the rest not only suggest the numbers of people whose incomes are inadequate, but they also indicate something about the justice of the economic and political system of a country. In addition these data provide an important way of evaluating the other basic needs policies. Income-related basic needs policies range from efforts to redistribute land to family planning efforts (large families with many children are the principal

factors associated with poverty for individuals), provision of free services, dietary supplements to the lowest income groups, and progressive taxation systems.

Indicators Selected (See Table 1)

A set of 12 indicators was chosen for inclusion in the reports, all published by the World Bank (1980). The Bank draws on many sources, including official statistics, for these widely recognized and accessible indicators and uses its expertise to make adjustments or to reject data that are unacceptably inaccurate.

Since most industrialized countries have achieved far more than minimum basic needs by any standard, for simplicity only the first three indicators in the table would be used for these nations, simply to demonstrate that they have achieved high standards.

These indicators individually and together provide the best quantitative perspective on the quality of life or standard of living available in virtually all countries. The figures are accurate, at least relative to many other indicators; they are all output measures; and they simultaneously reflect the achievement of several basic needs and give some idea of the distribution of welfare and the prevalence of very low living standards.

The first indicator, life expectancy, directly reflects levels of health, nutrition, and income, and thus indirectly links to employment, shelter, and so forth. A low figure usually suggests there is a sizable percent of the population facing poor living conditions. Particularly high infant death rates may lower this figure substantially, giving the impression that overall health conditions may be poorer than they actually are. The second measure, infant mortality, helps to interpret life expectancy measures, while offering independent information.

Table 1

List of Social Indicators Recommended for Use in the Annual Country Reports (most recent figure and a figure for approximately five years earlier to be given for each indicator.)

For All Countries

Life Expectancy at birth (total and female)
Infant Mortality Rate[1]
Adult Literacy Rate (total and female)

For Countries Where Minimum Basic Needs Are Not Met

Background Measures

GNP/Capita
GDP/Capita
Urban Population as Percent of Total
Population Growth Rate

Diagnostic Social Indicators

Adjusted Primary School Enrollment Ratio (total and female)[2]
Population/Physician
Percentage of Population With Access to Safe Water Percentage Share of total Household Income to the Lowest 20% and to the Highest 20% of Households.
Calorie Supply/Capita as Percentage of FAO Daily Requirements

[1] Mortiality Rate for ages 1-4 if infant mortality is unavailable
[2] Number of children enrolled as percent of population age 6-11

Infant mortality reflects primarily sanitary

List of Social Indicators Recommended for Use in the Annual Country Reports (most recent figure and a figure for approximately five years earlier to be given for each indicator.)

For All Countries

Life Expectancy at birth (total and female) conditions and the prevalence of contagious disease, as infants are most susceptible to these problems. It is a more sensitive indicator than life expectancy and shows a much more rapid response to many important health policies. Where infant mortality is high, there are unquestionably many people living in conditions under which their basic health needs are not met. The third indicator, literacy rate, is not only a direct measure of the achievement of one basic right, minimal education, it is well correlated in most countries with many other indices of quality of life, such as measures of employment, income or health. It is not necessarily directly correlated wth economic development or GNP/capita, however, and therefore it is a measure of a separate phenomenon. Whether literacy is the cause or effect of the meeting of basic needs, or even if it is spuriously linked to these other needs, it remains an excellent overall quality of life indicator. Figures on life expectancy and literacy are given by sex as indicators of the extent of discrimination.

Where these indicators show that high levels of welfare exist, with literacy near 100% and infant mortality within 10 or 20 per 1000 of the best levels worldwide, and life expectancy within 10 years or so of the best figures, for purposes of human rights policy, it can be assumed

that basic needs are adequately met. For countries, mostly the industrialized nations, presenting such evidence, the reports will provide no further data, except where some outstanding and human needs problem exists -- such as in the living standards of some ethnic or regional minority too small to seriously affect the indicators.

Several background indicators are essential to provide the context for interpreting the other measures, and to aid in assessing a government's capacity and committment to basic needs. GDP and GNP/capita give a sense of the potentially available resources. Urbanization indicators are important both because so much severe poverty is rural and because rapid and recent urbanization may have created problems and needs, such as new schools and water systems. The population growth rate is a harbinger of current and future needs.

Of the diagnostic indicators none are ideal. They were chosen for the range of issues they reflected and the fact that, of a wide range of social indicators, they are the least likely to be unreliable and the most likely to be available everywhere. Used in combination, the virtues of one can, to some extent, compensate for the limitations of others. The first figure, school enrollment ratios, does directly bear on the fullfullment of the right to an elementary education, but average national enrollment figures conceal large differences in the availability of schooling in rural and urban areas and serious problems of educational quality and attendance. Nonetheless the indicator does give a sense of the policy priority the country gives to education and the size of the educational gap.

The figure on population per physician has some general correlation with the quality and quantity of health care available. It was somewhat arbitrarily selected from a cluster of related figures, such as on number of hospital beds . Unfortunately health services, especially doctors, tend to concentrate in the cities, so it is problematic whether the indicator moves in a way which reflects health care actually available to rural residents, or to the poor. Moreover, government policies do not tend to be very successful at increasing or distributing the number of doctors in a country, as they are independent actors. Hopefully this indicator can eventually be replaced by a measure of health care that is more likely to reflect its actual availability to the poor.

The indicator of access to clean water is intended to serve a dual function of reflecting health and sanitary conditions as well as housing conditions. Not only is access to water an important component of housing quality in itself, it tends to correlate with a number of other harder-to-measure aspects of housing quality. As a measure of sanitary conditions, it does not measure sewage disposal facilities nor does it make distinctions between those with water piped to their homes and those who must walk a good distance for water. The indicator is, however, almost universally available, and it does have a direct connection to policies.

FAO's daily caloric requirement is a ball park estimate different for countries according to conditions such as climate. There is a difference of opinion about whether it directly caloric intake correlates with nutritional quality. Moreover, as it is calculated by dividing the total available food by the number of people, it understates the

nutritional deficit for the poorest. However, for countries where available calories per person are well below FAO standards, there is almost certainly a significant malnutrition problem for much of the population.

Finally, the measure of income distribution is the closest one can currently come to measuring poverty across many nations. Also, for U.S. foreign aid decisions, it provides a good indication of whether benefits will actually be directed to the needy. A country with a highly skewed income distribution and a poor showing on other social indicators is clearly not making the effort to fill the basic needs of its own people. Unfortunately such income distribution data are hard to get and of dubious adequacy in many countries, mainly the least developed. Income distribution may have to be inferred from the country's showing on other indicators and from the interpretive discussion in the report.

Conclusions and: Priorities for Social Indicators of Basic Needs

At this writing the value of these indicators to U.S. policy cannot be assessed as they have not yet been put to use. While some preliminary recommendations of this project were incorporated in the 1980 reports, it is unclear whether the Reagan Administration will try to implement human rights policy at all. Moreover the new Administration may not continue to produce the Country Reports in the form they have had, with considerable detail and evaluation published for each country. Going through this exercise of defining indicators, however, has clarified a number of principles, many of which partially derive from earlier research on the application of social indicators in U.S. domestic

policy. It also highlights major needs for future indicator development to aid in the implementation of basic needs policies in developing countries.

First, quantitative measures such as social indicators can be essential to the implementation of policies that must be applied across widely different cases -- countries, or cities, or groups. They contribute to the legitimacy and public acceptability of such policies, if they are substantively appropriate and relatively accurate and backed by a neutral and reputable institution. They can reduce the complexity and subjectivity of the decision process. The role of these indicators however, is not and should not be a decisive or mechanical one as decision-makers, in most cases quite justifiably, prefer to maintain their prerogative of making individual judgements.

This need for flexibility is particularly important where policies are vague, evolving or acquiring definition in the course of implementation. In this typical situation, social indicators provide one way of preventing some bias and of assuring some objectivity in the information policy makers are given. But the gap between the policy choices and the information provided by indicators is vast. While some new indicators more closely reflective of policy concerns could help to close the gap, ultimately the critical component remains the more subjective, qualitative assessment of experts, which places the indicators in context, and provides an overall explanation for the country's problems and its government's behavior.

Many policy analysts are limited in their ability to interweave qualitative and quantitative information to produce an accurate and

sensitive account. Either they mistrust the bias of interpretive analyses and prefer to depend on indicators, or they consider quantitative data to be without meaning. The quantitative and qualitative analysts are usually very different kinds of people and neither understand well the strengths and limitations of the other's method. Therefore an educational process is essential to assuring that indicators are used appropriately. Those called in to assist public agencies in developing and using social indicators cannot consider their job to be complete when they have identified or designed the measures. They must also assure that those who are expected to work with the data understand what they do and do not mean. Fears that indicators may be substituted for well trained judgment should be brought into the open and the ways that indicators can assist, rather than replace, these judgments should be explored and clarified. Those with overblown expectations for indicators must also be confronted with the reality of limitations on data reliability and with the inevitability of a large conceptual gap between the simplicity of indicators and the complexity of policy. Finally, it may be important to demonstrate to decision-makers or analysts that, whether or not the use of indicators contributes to their own knowledge of the problems, it can greatly enhance the legitimacy and acceptability of the positions they take. While indicators often limit public action because of what they show, these quantitative measures can compensate policy makers for this loss of flexibility by giving them more leverage.

As many public agencies and bureaucrats are not particularly receptive or accustomed to the use of indicators, the strategy should be to introduce at the outset those that are simplest to obtain, least controversial, and most transparent to understand. The indicators should be

clearly connected to the policy questions that concern the participants. If the indicators are complicated or only vaguely connected to the task at hand, they will simply be ignored when the consultant has left. But, on the other hand, if the simple measures are helpful to the analysts or decision makers, they will begin to seek out additional indicators. They will pay attention to indicators they have themselves asked for. Once the process of using indicators in policy has begun, it tends to build on itself, and it can be a self-perpetuating learning process. But if the perfect indicator is imposed at the outset, its value may be entirely unappreciated. It is apt to be very expensive and difficult to produce, and there is no particular reason to expect the indicator to become integrated into the policy process.

Indicators, must be appropriate to the policy objectives, however, particularly as the measures become increasingly influential in policy. In the case of human rights policy, if the U.S. begins to withold aid from countries making little effort to provide doctors, the countries in turn may develop policies which will increase the numbers of doctors. As there are many who doubt that more doctors will mean better rural health, the use of the indicator, population/physician, could be counterproductive. Any list of indicators to aid in policy application should be viewed as only the first stage in an evolutionary process.

The indicators proposed for the Bureau of Human Rights represents merely what appear to be the best, current, widely available indicators which generally deal with the issues. They should be replaced and supplemented however, as soon as possible, by a number of other kinds of measures. If not, they will distort policy in many countries away from

effective efforts for basic needs. The highest current priority and the most likely to be achieved in the near future is for indicators that provide information on the distribution of welfare and services. Indicators of urban-rural differences would provide a beginning, but the ideal is to develop indicators differentiating conditions facing the poorest and best-off groups, wherever they are.

For several important basic needs, virtually no adequate indicators are now available. Concepts and methods to produce such indicators on nationwide bases are urgently needed. Measures of employment and underemployment are critical, as are measures of adequacy of shelter, appropriate to individual countries and climates. Concepts and surveys that will permit the measurement of family income and wealth and its distribution in a society are also essential. Finally, both academic research and practical efforts are essential to develop ways of defining, and measuring the implicit international minimum needs standards which either now exist or are emerging.

Standards are an important step beyond indicators, though they depend critically on indicators. Each may have to be developed individually for different countries. Yet some measure of norms and expectations should be an explicit rather than implicit component of policy. In addition, a considerable need exists for conceptual and theoretical work on ways of making comparisons among countries, and on meaningful ways of developing or applying international standards. Standards are inevitably applied in international policy -- either justly or unjustly. At best, however, they are broad enough to encompass the range of conditions that exist in different nations and yet consistent enough to

reflect the deeper intent to compare well-being in many different societies. The task is not easy, but it is important.

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